Publication Chemist and Druggist
Place of Issue London
Date of Issue 8th October 1927
Instructions W.H.M.M.

The Fecund Versatility

of the French genius finds a striking example in the life of Marcellin Berthelot, the centenary of whose birth is commemorated in the article by your correspondent. It is only when his historical researches are considered along with those most important contributions he made to modern chemistry that his great services to his favourite science can be properly understood. He himself said that every science should be placed in its historical setting if we wished to understand its true character and its philosophical import. It is impossible to overlook the remarkable contributions which Berthelot made to the history of alchemy and chemistry. The author of every treatise dealing with such matters, however small the work may be, has had to draw upon the almost bewildering profusion of materials which he made available in his books dealing with this subject. The later years of his life were largely occupied in the deciphering and annotating a large number of MSS., and with describing their contents in such a methodical manner as to afford his readers a compendious but most comprehensive view of the extent and limits of the chemical knowledge of the adepts of the middle ages as well as of their predecessors. In 1889, when he published his "Introduction a l'Etude de la Chimie des Anciens et du Moyen Age," he said, in the preface to that work, that to these historical studies he had devoted the greater part of his time for six years. But the end was not then reached, because subsequently he wrote and published several more important works of the same kind.

A Consideration

of Berthelot's historical writings in the order in which they appeared exhibits the orderliness of his work and the plan which must have been in his mind from the initiation of it. It was after he had passed middle age that he turned his labours into this channel, and it was in 1885, when he was 58 years of age, that the first book of the series appeared; it was "Les Origines de l'Alchimie." This was succeeded by the following:—"Collections des Anciens Alchimistes Grecs" (1887-1888, 4 parts); "Introduction a l'Etude de la Chimie des Anciens et du Moyen Age" (1889), "La Chimie au Moyen Age" (1893, 3 vols.). The culmination towards which he had worked was his "La Révolution Chimique, Lavoisier," (1890). The persevering curiosity and ardent devotion combined with that logical intellect, which was so essentially French, have produced volumes which will enable every student of chemistry to place his science in the historical frame which Berthelot said was absolutely necessary to the understanding of its place in any philosophical contemplation of the scheme of this universe. The first of these treatises—"Les Origines de l'Alchimie"—provides a foundation for the subsequent ones. It is divided into four books, in which the author treats of the historical sources of the art, the alchemists (mythical, pseudonymous and those ascertainably historical), the materials and operations of the alchemists, and their theories as compared with modern theories. This, however, is not the place to attempt an analysis of these volumes. It must suffice for me to attempt to sharpen some reader's interest in this fascinating study. It is not "dry-as-dust" when provided with such a guide as our author.

22200084679